

# Grant Proposal Report from Task Force

**Recommendation:** Forward only if corrections/modifications can be negotiated

\*Note about grant type: Fixed amount grants award a lower cost-per-member to organizations and reimbursement is based solely on enrollment. The grantee is relieved of tracking, budgeting, and reporting the financial resources used to operate the program. The result is a greater emphasis on enrollment, retention, and performance targets. The only eligible applicants are organizations with AmeriCorps grant experience.

**Legal Applicant:** Dept. of Agriculture,  
Conservation, Forestry

**Program Name:** Maine Conservation Corps

**Category:** ☐ AC Formula  
☒ AC Competitive  
☐ Other Competition

**Type:** ☐ Planning  
☐ Operating  
☒ Fixed Amount\* see note above  
☐ Ed Award Only

**Federal Focus Area:** Economic Opportunity + Environmental Stewardship

**Applicant type:** ☐ New (no prior AmeriCorps)  
☒ Re-compete (# of yrs: 24)

**Proposed Dates:** Start: 1/01/2019  
End: 12/31/2021

## Requested Resources: Funds and Slots

	CNCS		Local Share
Operating			
Member Support			
Indirect (Admin)			
CNCS Award amount	\$660,224	Total Local Share (cash + in-kind)	
% sharing proposed	n/a		n/a
% share required	n/a		n/a
Cost-per-member proposed	\$13,430 (\$13,430 allowed)	Note- Cost Reimbursement grant rate is \$14,932	

Total AmeriCorps Member Service Years: 49.16	Slot Types Requested						
	FT	HT	RHT	QT	MT		Total
Slots With living allowance							
Slots with only ed award	10	20	71	8			109

## Program Description (executive summary):

The 109 Maine Conservation Corps AmeriCorps members will conduct environmental projects and activities throughout the State of Maine. AmeriCorps members will recruit and serve with 700 community volunteers who will develop the skills needed to maintain the trails after AmeriCorps members complete them. The CNCS investment of \$660,224 will be matched with \$1,342,779 in local funding and \$109,993 of in-kind contributions.

Maine Conservation Corps operates two program components. Thirty Environmental Stewards (10 full-time and 20 half-time) serve individually at host sites to build volunteer engagement and management capacity in addition to completing habitat restoration, invasive species monitoring/eradication, water quality monitoring, and small scale trail maintenance projects conducted by local volunteers. Field Teams, operating in groups of 3 or 6, are engaged predominantly in trail construction and maintenance activities for federal, state, municipal, or nonprofit conservation agencies. Forty of the 79 Field Team members will be economically disadvantaged young people who receive job training and skill development while completing trail repair and construction.

The job skills training and development focuses on soft skills such as communication, accountability, conflict resolution, and team work. In addition, members complete the ME Dept of Education work readiness program that develops interview skills, resume writing, and job search plans.

Conservation Corps annually conducts a call for proposals from public and nonprofit conservation/recreation agencies. The proposals are reviewed and a set selected for support based on the fit between the goals of the project and the mission of ME-CC.

**Service locations/Host sites:**

- None listed. Historically, ME-CC Field Team projects have benefitted municipal and state parks/recreation areas and nonprofit organizations (e.g., Appalachian Trail Club Maine and Hancock County Soil and Water Conservation District). Environmental Stewards have served in federal/state public and nonprofit environmental organizations (e.g., Wells Reserve).

**Performance measures** (targets proposed for Year 1; targets for years 2 and 3 set in continuations):

SERVICE ACTIVITIES

OUTPUT: EN5: Miles of trails or rivers treated.

Proposed target: 200

OUTCOME: EN5.1: Miles of trails or rivers improved

Proposed target: 180

OUTPUT: O2: Number of econ disadvantaged individuals receiving job training or other skill development services.

Proposed target: 40

OUTCOME: Number of individuals who are employed, continue education, enter military or national service

Proposed target: 35

MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

OUTPUT: Number of AmeriCorps program training and other formal development activities that result in increased AmeriCorps member skills, knowledge, and abilities related to the service assignment

Proposed target: *not provided*

OUTCOME: Number of AmeriCorps members demonstrating increased competency in skills or application of knowledge.

Proposed target: *not provided*

CAPACITY BUILDING

OUTPUT: G3-3.1: Number of community volunteers recruited by organizations or participants

Proposed target: 700

OUTPUT: G3-3.7: Hours of service contributed by community volunteers who were recruited

Proposed target: *not provided*

OUTCOME: G3-3.13: Number of additional activities completed and/or program outputs produced by the program

Proposed target: *not provided*

**Scoring Detail:**

**Peer Reviewer Consensus Score.** *Assessment of narrative using point distribution from federal agency. Major categories (Program Design, Organizational Capability, Budget and Cost) are dictated by CFR rubric for scoring. The break downs within categories are from federal agency and change annually.*

	Score
<b>Program Design</b>	
Need	0
Theory of Change & Logic Model	16.08
Evidence Tier (matches federal tier of "preliminary" )	n/a
EB Criteria 1: The applicant's evidence is of satisfactory quality. (Applicants with no evidence describe an evidence-informed theory of change. )	2
EB Criteria 2: The applicant's data collection systems are sufficient to yield high quality process and outcome data.	0
EB Criteria 3: The applicant demonstrates adequate capacity to use process and outcome data including performance measurement (and evaluation data if applicable) to inform continuous learning and program improvement.	1
EB Criteria 4: The applicant's long-term research agenda is aligned to the organization's learning needs and position on the evidence continuum (evidence tier).	0
Notice Priority	2.01
Member Experience	7
<b>Organizational Capability</b>	
Organizational Background & Staffing	7
Compliance/Accountability	8
Culture that Values Learning	5.36
Member Supervision	2
<b>Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy</b>	25
<b>Data Plan Quality</b> (assessed as adequate but no points given for this component)	n/a
<b>Total Peer Reviewer Score</b>	<b>75.45</b>

**Task Force Consensus Score.** *The Task Force reviewers assess the additional technical criteria that states are directed to consider by the CFR.*

	Score
Program Model	4.95
Past Performance	15
Financial Plan	10
Fiscal Systems	10
<b>Total Task Force Score</b>	<b>39.95</b>
<b>Peer Review Score</b>	<b>+ 75.45</b>
<b>Final Score for Applicant</b>	<b>115.4 of 150 potential</b>

**Final Assessment of Application:**

- ☐ Forward Application to National Competition with no corrections/modifications  
☒ Forward to National Competition with corrections/modifications  
☐ Do Not Forward to National Competition

## Referenced Conditions/Modification

- Address omission of the Needs section. Why did the program drop the reference to the link between outdoor recreation and the economies of rural areas?
- Theory of Change and Evaluation data collection plans (2 different ones for 2 different purposes) need to be clarified in the appropriate sections
- Distinction in activities, assignments, and numbers of Environmental Stewards vs Field Teams needs to be clarified.
- For Field Teams, provide a more concrete description of intentional methods used to develop soft skills (teamwork, communication, conflict resolution, etc.) and the training Team Leaders receive to be effective in using those methods.
- Because actual evidence (preliminary-outcome study) tier this proposal meets is lower than the one claimed (preliminary-replication), the evidence section needs to be edited to address the criteria of the lower tier.
- Enter missing performance measure targets.
- Submit on or before January 12 so Task Force can review final proposal and determine if conditions have been met before federal deadline of Jan 18.

## Peer Reviewer Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Program Design. This section covers the community need, service to be performed in response to need, evidence the service will be effective, roles for AmeriCorps and partners, performance measures, and anticipated results for year one.

- Need not addressed. Missing from proposal.
- Good program described but there is no case for any of the work – youth development, environmental stewards, etc.
- Good proposal overall. Recommend strengthening (or clarifying ) the link between "need" and this project. Poverty rates are mentioned, but it is not clear how this proposal will positively impact poverty in Maine.
- How are contracts are factored in and utilized?
- Proposes to use Washington State conservation program but is adapting it from riparian habitat restoration to improvement of trail conditions.
- The need for rural access for trails (as well as urban) is crucial for economic and healthy life activities.
- The only supporting data offered for program is % poverty in certain counties. No data about job readiness or environmental conditions in Maine. No discussion of what current condition is and how program would either add to efforts or take things to the next level.
- The theory of change section requires that applicants "Demonstrate that service by AmeriCorps members will produce significant contributions to existing efforts to address the stated problem." What are the existing efforts?
- Applicant is proposing to adapt a Washington state initiative so it does not qualify for the replication evidence tier using RFP definitions.
- Evidence presentation is confusing. Not clear what components of their own program they are seeing in what is presented [from Washington]. Needs some explanation at the start.
- They didn't address some of the required criteria. Example, their data collection systems.
- The applicant submitted two studies and indicates it will replicate one study after modification to reflect different focus areas. The other study submitted by applicant stands alone in its narrative, with no connection being made to how its relevance applies to what MCC intends to replicate. Applicant provides these studies, but does not describe its own data collection system, anticipated performance measures, its intent to use process and outcome data, or its vision for long-term research as it relates to the organization's learning needs. There is not enough information provided to allow this reviewer to determine applicant's capacity to actually conduct/replicate this
- Applicant indicates it will focus on a specific funding priority, and provides details about anticipated outcomes.

- MCC has been around a long time...its success has been proven for many areas. But the state of Maine is lagging in trail access and long term sustainability of its foot and non-motorized trails. This proposal helps to jump start this process in areas of the state that need it badly
- Member experience very well done. Covers some of the more obscure benefits of AmeriCorps service.
- Applicant clearly provides more than adequate information about each of the Member Experience assessment criteria listed and is particularly strong in its description of how it will promote skill development, and connections to the broader National Service network.
- Someone needs to tell them to sit down with the narrative instructions and, side-by-side, answer criteria in the instructions in the order presented. A lot has to be culled from other sections.

#### Organizational Capability.

- This plan of action takes a program that is adequately staffed to its appropriate level given its level of commitment to the state of Maine. To make the leap forward, it needs this sort of infusion of funding
- With its multiple years of experience, applicant describes a multi-layered staffing and capacity to assure intended outcomes. It describes success with creating and maintaining strong community partnerships to achieve its goals.
- Office staff large enough to handle federal requirements
- Compliance appears to be a priority for applicant, with self-audits, member/supervisor reporting, specific training in compliance, mandatory training prior to member placement. All assessment criteria listed under compliance are addressed.
- Love the approach they are taking with a statewide reach, but focus on rural communities. Plus the training and opportunities for those who do the actual field work in such areas will be a huge learning experience
- Heavy emphasis here on organizational structure and processes, strategic planning, etc., but very little emphasis on learning. (Only one reference to "lessons learned" in this section.)
- Partner surveys, member surveys, impact reports, continuous improvement efforts, media communication, annual reports, quarterly reports, social media – collect a lot but what do they learn? What do they do with it?
- Frequent, timely, multi-layered member supervision system described, with strong training component for all supervisors, and effective support systems in place
- Ratio of one trainer to 3 to 6 team members is adequate.
- Overall, proposal is well thought out and describes an effective use of funds which should benefit Maine residents, as it promotes community volunteerism and connections to the rich environment Mainers enjoy.

Budget Adequacy and Cost Effectiveness. (CNCS did not allow narrative for this section in this year's application. They directed reviewers to consider the budget narrative and it's formulas, accuracy, expense items.)

- Large amount of matching funds including private funding.
- Seems like they have truly made the effort to make this a collaboration between state and federal plus local cost effectiveness. nearly 2-1 is a solid ratio and the accuracy seems spot on with my experience in such matters
- Maine Bureau of Parks, Baxter State Park, and the National Park Service contracted with MCC for over \$1.5M in trail rehab between 2014 - 2016.
- Budget submitted appears designed to allow applicant to achieve desired outcomes. Local match will support project. Cost per MSY equals maximum allowed

Data Collection and Evaluation Plan. (Refers to applicant's plan for collecting data that will be used for performance measurement, continuous improvement, and development of an evaluation plan.)

- Modeling after the Washington Conservation Corps evaluation plan to assess changes in trail tread construction and erosion / corridor degradation using a BACI statistical analysis.
- Applicant does not describe its own data collection system, nor does it address plans for developing one

- With regard to everything except evaluation, the applicant is strong. If the evaluation issue can be addressed, this applicant should be successful in reaching desired outcomes described.

## **Task Force Review Notes and Appraisal Summary:**

Program Model. This section's criteria relate to alignment of proposal with funding priorities in RFP, significance of program in the context of statewide issues, the applicant's readiness to take on a significant cadre of volunteers (AmeriCorps members) and its demonstrated ability to engage volunteers, and the match between the program traits and Commission funding goals.

- Given the lack of data on trail conditions, it's hard to make an assessment about the impact of this work. However given, the sheer number of trails in the state that the proposal notes relative to current investments, this program could likely have significant impact on trail infrastructure if successful. The jobs projection data included in the proposal did not speak to need for "hard" skills that Field Teams and Stewards would develop, which makes it hard to judge the potential impact of this important outcome. The proposed program has a strong member-focused intervention around soft skill and job search development which is an important complement to the community impact. One aspect of the program model that is not fleshed-out enough is around the evaluation. Although it is encouraging that a significant investment is proposed in evaluation, it is not clear that the sampling and analysis method identified in the proposal is translatable to the work of the field teams.
- Regarding Program Design: There is no discussion of Need. Theory of Change/Logic Model - How does a poor county equate to the need of environmental stewardship? Perhaps low population better equates? How does improving environmental conditions help poverty stricken individuals? How many members will be assigned to each of the listed counties? Unsure what community problem is being solved. Evidence Base: The State Parks mentioned are in which counties? How do they relate to the high poverty counties? The anecdotal evidence is weak. Member Experience: Specifically, how will MCC recruit members from the aforementioned counties?
- Concern is the lack of strong evidence that this work is beneficial to the environment and more importantly that this work will result in useable job skills for the participants.
- Could not tell what they are trying to accomplish. Poorly written even though don't have concerns about MCC. Don't seem to have the data they need to prove what they want to argue.
- Didn't give much information about the Environmental Stewards. Are the skills Environmental Stewards develop in demand in the marketplace?
- Did not distinguish between Field Teams and Environmental Stewards. Also did not connect the skills members might acquire to skills needed in workforce.

## Assessment of Past Performance

- Programmatically, past performance from the MCC has been exceptional. They consistently meet or exceed performance targets and enrollment. Given the partnerships with Baxter State Park, and others, it is clear that MCC is relied on heavily for trail maintenance needs. The included evaluation provided good initial evidence that job search training had tangible positive outcomes. Due to some of findings as a result of compliance reviews identified in the staff summary, I would rate past performance as strong instead of exceptional.
- Maine Conservation Corps is well established and has performed to a very high standard in the past.

## Assessment of Financial Plan

- There were no major budget errors. The expenses seemed reasonable given the activities proposed in the narrative.

## Fiscal Systems

- The financial management systems survey seems to indicate strong financial systems. There was one audit finding which seems to have been quickly addressed.